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SUBJECT: URIBE'S PARTY WINS BIG IN POLITICAL MUSICAL CHAIRS

REF: BOGOTA 2833

SUMMARY

¶1. President Uribe's "U" party consolidated its Congressional base as part of a political reform that gave members until September 14 to change parties. While the changes left the balance of power between Uribe's coalition and the opposition in the Congress unchanged, the "U" and Conservative Parties increased membership by absorbing members from smaller partners. The opposition Liberal Party maintained its position while engineering a key acquisition: the Presidency of the House. Small parties and the Radical Change party (divided over whether or not to support the reelection of Uribe) were the biggest losers in the process. While some political reforms -- allowing coalition candidates, mandating public roll call votes and sanctioning parties whose members engage in illicit activities -- have taken effect, others -- involving campaign finance, sanctions for electoral violations, increasing internal party democracy, gender equity, and marginalized territories -- must be worked out in an implementing bill. These reforms will significantly impact the 2010 legislative elections. End Summary.

DEADLINE PASSES FOR POLITICAL MEAT MARKET

¶2. On September 14, the deadline passed on a two-month period to change party banners under a July 14 constitutional reform. Approximately 57 congressmen, hundreds of departmental parliamentarians, and thousands of municipal counselors took advantage of the singular opportunity to change parties and keep their seats (they normally must resign their seats according to electoral rules). The overall political reform was designed to strengthen political parties and increase their accountability in light of the parapolitical scandal that rocked the 2006-10 Congress in which congressmen were accused of colluding with paramilitaries. The larger parties supported the party-switching clause against the objections of smaller parties and the Alternative Democratic Pole (PDA). The party defections have set the stage for upcoming legislative agenda battles and national legislative elections next March.

THE CONGRESSIONAL BOX SCORE

13. These are the figures reported to us by the Electoral Observation Mission (MOE), an independent monitoring organization:

	HOUSE(166)		SENATE (102)	
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URIBE ALLIED	Before-After		Before-After	
--The U	34	44	20	30
--Conservative	32	36	18	23
--Rad. Change	18	12	15	10
--Other	24	17	17	7
-TOTAL COALITION	108	109	70	70
OTHER				
--Liberal	36	39	18	18
--PDA	8	7	10	10
--Other	14	11	4	4
-TOTAL OTHER	58	57	32	32

URIBE COALITION CONSOLIDATES

14. The overall balance of power in Congress did not change significantly and the Uribe legislative coalition continues to control approximately 68% of the Senate and 66% of the House. However, the coalition emerged more concentrated and united around the "U" and Conservative Parties, which gained seats at the expense of their smaller partners. The two parties alone now control approximately 52% (up from 37%) of the Senate and 48% (up from 40%) of the House. Previously, the coalition majority depended on three major parties and seven minor ones making vote whipping and maintaining coalition discipline difficult as seen in the final push to pass the presidential reelection referendum (see reftel).

15. Party presidents Luis Carlos Restrepo of the U and Efraín Cepeda of the Conservatives can now better coordinate their political machinery to turn out the popular vote for the possible re-election referendum, and for 2010 congressional and presidential elections. The consolidation also diminishes the possibility of losing smaller partners that cannot meet the minimum vote threshold for official legal status in the next election. The consolidation has also created some political conundrums, as some original party members will now have to compete with their new colleagues for the same votes in next year's elections. Acknowledging these problems, Restrepo said publicly that the reconciliation of party lists with new members will be a difficult task.

16. The remaining small Uribe parties are seeking ways to survive and remain relevant. Citizen Convergence, with 17 seats, is the largest remaining of them. The party lost members to the U and Conservative Parties but also gained seats from smaller parties. The party announced that it is seeking to combine with other remaining small parties under a new name and replace Radical Change as the number three party in the coalition.

OPPOSITION DEFIANT

¶7. Cesar Gaviria, opposition Liberal Party President, declared, "The National Government tried to end my party, but the result was the opposite." Before the reform, the Liberals were the single largest party in Congress with 54 seats. Although now surpassed by the U, the Liberals gained three seats, including the President of the House, Edgar Gomez. Although Gomez --who left Uribe-allied Citizen Convergence-- is now officially in the opposition, he has been supportive of continuing Uribe policies, and has publicly said that he would not actively oppose the GOC but rather would concentrate on promoting open debates in the House. Gaviria told the press that Gomez's move to the party was engineered on July 20 during Congressional leadership elections. The Liberals gave Gomez their support knowing that he would switch allegiances later. The PDA, the far left opposition party, lost one congressional seat.

RADICAL CHANGE PARTY DISMEMBERED

¶8. Radical Change is the biggest loser of the major parties, dropping by eleven members of Congress with commensurate losses at the local level. The party, a member of the Uribe congressional coalition, had already been torn apart internally between those who opposed the reelection referendum -- led by party president and presidential candidate German Vargas Lleras -- and those who supported it. The party began disciplinary hearings against five representatives who defied party orders and voted for the referendum prompting them and four others to desert to the U Party before the deadline. Now that the staunch Uribe loyalists have left the party, the party continues with less power, but more united behind the presidential candidacy of Vargas Lleras. Vargas Lleras announced that the party was not passing to the opposition but that it disagreed with the possible reelection of President Uribe.

SMALL PARTIES AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

¶9. At least 8 of the currently 16 legally recognized parties are at risk of disappearing after losing members to larger parties. Party consolidation was a key objective of both the 2009 and previous 2003 political reforms. Consolidation is intended to create stability in the party system and define clear party platforms and divisions between the government and opposition. Fewer parties will also help the National Electoral Council (CNE) to distribute state funds for campaigns efficiently (the Colombian system is a mix of public and private funding) and enforce electoral laws.

LOCAL IMPACT

¶10. National trends were also played out at the local level. The U Party added to their growing local presence -- 2007 was the first time they participated in local elections -- drastically increasing

their number of municipal counselors from 1,280 to 2,080 and departmental legislators from 59 to 101. The traditional Liberal Party also fared well and remains the strongest party locally, adding 500 municipal counselors for a total of 3,000.

ELECTION SEASON LOOMS BUT RULES OF THE GAME UNKNOWN

¶11. Many 2009 reforms require a second law to establish implementing regulations. Congress is currently considering two versions of the law, one presented by the GOC and the other by members of Congress from across the political spectrum and written in collaboration with the United Nations Development Program. The GOC and political parties are in negotiations to reconcile the texts but election rules will remain unclear until a compromise is reached. Reforms needing implementing regulations involve campaign finance, sanctions for electoral law violations, and rules to increase internal party democracy. Also undefined are the principles of gender equity and a "special regimen" for marginalized territories. One change that will have a significant impact on the next presidential election is the ability to have a multi-party primary to select a coalition candidate.

¶12. Some new rules, similar to party switching, have already made an impact. The first was the requirement for public and individually counted votes to allow public review of voting records and for parties to manage party discipline. Before the reform, legislators would often simply bang on their desks to indicate approval for a measure. Another is the "vacant seat" provision to punish parties whose members are convicted of crimes related to narcotrafficking, illegally armed groups, and crimes against humanity. Previously, when an office holder was removed, the party simply replaced that person with the next candidate on the party's election list. With the new provision, the party would lose the seat permanently, and the quorum and majorities would be adjusted accordingly. In 2014, a higher threshold (3% of total votes as opposed to 2%) will further limit the number of officially recognized political parties.

BROWNFIELD